DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 153 235 CS 204 072

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TITLE Black Stylistic Features in Student Compositions.
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (67th, New York City, November 24-26, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Culture; *Black Dialects; *Black Students; *Composition Skills (Literary); Higher Education; Imagery; *Language Styles; *Language Usage; Nonstandard Dialects; Prose; Symbols (Literary); Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Cultural and dialect differences affect the writing style of black college students in several different ways. Some stylistic features, such as hypercorrection that involves confused word choice, grammatical deviation, or incorrect word order, are undesirable in spite of the fact that they indicate a knowledge of the formality of writing and a desire to acquire a more learned tone. Other culturally based stylistic aspects of writing, however, are indicative of cultural history and values. These include extensive use of imagery in expository and argumentative writing, presentation of a rhythmic pattern in writing, and a tendency toward personal involvement in the content of the writing. These elements of style are unique and should be retained in student writing as valid manifestations of different language usage preferences. (RAI)

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# BLACK STYLISTIC FEATURES IN STUDENT COMPOSITIONS

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Since the 1960's, linguists and educators have focused attention on dialect differences. Most of the studies have been concerned with speech; only recently has attention been given to writing. Also, most attention has been centered on a particular set of grammatical and phonological features; attention to style has been largely overlooked, especially in examination of student writing. Admittedly, nonstandard grammatical and phonological interferences are hindrances to effective academic writing. However, it would be desirable to look at some of the less addressed aspects of cultural differences that are reflected in the writing of college students. Such older students often exhibit transitional features - features between standard and nonstandard usage; such features must be understood in order for teachers to help students omit the use of them in school writing. More interestingly, such students exhibit other culturally based stylistic aspects that should be retained and encouraged as valid manifestations of different language use preferences.

Style refers to choice, to selection and arrangement of features. Under such a definition, hypercorrections become stylistic features. Hypercorrections are usually more prevalent in the writing of older nonstandard speakers. While not desirable in themselves, hypercorrections do indicate both a knowledge of the greater formality of writing and a desire to acquire a more learned tone. In some cases, hypercorrection leads to malapropism. Wayne ( 1970, reported in Wolfram and Whiteman, 1971) gives some examples from students' papers in one composition class: "Kenneth Clark states how black people with education have the attendance to outdo..." and "The Black Ghetto has recessonal began to unhide itself." Some hypercorrections have shown up

frequently in the papers of certain students at the University of the District of Columbia. Every student who is making a transition from nonstandard to standard will not make such hypercorrections, but those who do so, so do often. "Both essays were afflicated with problems concerning black people." and "While conversating with Conrad...." Such students are confusing words or hearing words incorrectly through lack of attention. These students would profit from directed vocabulary study and focused reading. As is the case with many dialect speakers, such students generally are not giving complete attention to the "new" words with which they come in contact. Newly acquired words whould be integrated into the students' writing assignments as often as feasible.

Another type of hypercorrection takes the form of a grammatical deviation. Basic studies of Black vernacular language have identified the absence of the -s third person present tense marker as a feature of the dialect of many Black nonstandard speakers. Such an absence follows the West African languages' practice of regularization of verb forms and omission of redundancy. As such students begin to acquire the standard -s ending, some, who also may show absence of other -s markers, become confused. Many learn or already know that final -s is a plural marker for nouns. They also know or learn that final -s is a verb marker. Not remembering exactly which verb form is -s marked, such students may extend the idea of -s as plural to the verb. The following examples of such hypercorrections were selected at random from the papers of University of D. C. freshmen:

To overcome oppression, even leaders has been killed.

Political jobs lacks glamour.

The ironic situations becomes more pronounced in the underground setting.

Obi and Johnny reacts to the problems facing them.

Roselily, Myrna, and Mrs. Franklin are the three Black women that finds trouble in love.

In each case, when students were questioned as to why they chose the -s ending for the verb, the answer was that the subject was plural, so the verb also had to be plural, and plural was shown with an -s ending.

A third hypercorrection may appear at first to be an error in punctuation. Knowledge of the dialect spoken by some Black students will indeed indetify the feature as a hypercorrection. In some Black nonstandard dialects, there is no marker for possessive. Word order alone shows possession. Students who learn that noun possessives are marked with an 's often extend the 's to use as the plural marker. Again, the students may not have attended to the fact that 's means possession while -s alone is a plural marker. A few students even extend the 's to the verb. Some examples are:

Student's can not expect to graduate without mastery of the basics.

The play tell's about complications in love.

The women's are not the main characters in the story.

Recognition of the part dialect plays in the above three hypercorrections and realization that such are a transitional stage between acquisition of standard usage and interference from nonstandard forms will help the instructor to plan appropriate learning strategies for standard acquisition.

There are some aspects of Black style that are common to Blacks of all backgrounds. Such aspects are not limited to speakers of vernacular dialects but are also found in Black standard speakers. Indeed, these features can be observed in non-American Blacks who write in English as well as in American Blacks. Such language aspects are more truly indicative

of a Black cultural style than the transitional forms which are found only in the writing of certain dialect speakers. While the language forms in question are also used by non-Blacks, the preference for their use is indicative of cultural history and values. These features are found also in many situations that would be considered inappropriate by other standard speakers. The stylistic features included in this category are extensive use of imagery in expository and argumentative writing ( really in all types of writing), presentation of a rhythmic pattern in writing, and a tendency toward personal involvement in the content of the writing.

Basil Matthews, Ph. D., writes about symbolic imagery in Black expression. Matthews says in an article in New Directions, the Howard University magazine, that "...in Black use the thought is generated through the use of a picture concept (visualization) rather than through the use of ... theoretical statement.... In Black imagery, a picture of the thing as it really exists is put before the mind and imagination. In the Black method, one preceeds through visual thinking as against non-visual thinking... in Black use thought is a living thing...." ( p. 16). Further in the article, Matthews lists some of the " major patterns of difference between Black and standard Western usage of symbolic imagery." Imagery in Black language is "not a matter of occasion but a matter of routine" ; the use of imagery in Black language is " intensely affective; its affectivity is a directive or culturally patterned affectivity and not mere happenstance" ' the use of imagery in Black language is "oriented to conceptualize and to define rather than to seduce or to cosmetize" ; the use of imagery in Black language "introduces the self into the objective analysis of objects, events or ideas" , and the use of imagery in Black language " mediates a wholeness approach or a cosmic approach to learning." ( p. 18 ).

As the following excerpts from papers of students of the University of the District of Columbia will show, the use of culturally based Black stylistic features need not interfere with the message and, indeed, such use may inhance the writing - even though the Western tradition is based on Aristotelian principles that most properly limit the use of imagery to poetry and the use of rhythm to poetry and music.

> Fate like pain holds no barriers, sets no limitations, and touches everyone. Kwesi is dead, killed by a poisonous snake. Is it an act of mercy from God or a cruel hand of fate? The numbness that results from novacaine can only slightly touch the depth of Maami Ama's pain.

> Darkness surrounds the somber streets with equanimity, periodically punctured by lights from windows casting oblong shadows upon a blanket of blackness. Somewhere, from within this infinite void, sounds are heard: laughter, pain, fighting, an uttered curse from unseen lips, the cries of birth, the final sigh of death -- then silence pacifies the darkness. A clock strikes discordant notes... three... four... five; day lifts the veil of night as a bridegroom desirous of the final marital sacrament. The smoke of cooking fires invades the senses, as queues of men file past staring vacantly, their destination, the mines. The debris of night is picked up and life moves on -- the cycle to be repeated incessantly. For "it is so in the city." Peter Abrahams, in his novel MINE BOY, illustrates the effects of a vast technological society upon an individual from a rural South African environment and the problems that ensue as the individual encounters the "forces" of the city.

> How can Black music be described best? What is the meaning of this approach that will not be kept within stifling restraints? Black music is the story of Black people, the relating of life as They have to live it, to themselves as well as the rest of the world. Their lot has been anything but common and so has their music. They are a love people and their music is love. They are a spiritual people and their music is spiritual. They are a strong people and their music is strong. They are a colorful people and their music is colorful. (Note the rhythm of this passage.)

> This same name company informed one of its biggest stars a few years earlier that if she persisted with her plans to tour Europe with a well-known rock group, she would not record for anyone else. She went. That was around ten years ago. I haven't heard a thing recorded by her for about ten years. Wonder where she is today? Going from nabob to nonentity overnight is a real case of the blues. Have you ever had the blues?

In all of the above selections we see the use of extensive imagery. These are not poems or stories but expository essays ( the first two) and a research paper ( the last two excerpts). A Black instructor who corrected the first and last selections made only favorable comments on the imagery; a white instructor who corrected the second selection commented that perhaps the student should use less description. The last selection in addition to the imagery and rhythm mentioned previously carries the personal tone to a different level by involving the reader. Such reader involvement coincides with the African oral tradition in which the audience participated in any recitation, and audience response was not only desirable but was considered part of the presentation. Another example of such audience involvement can be illustrated by the difficulty involved in convincing Black students to avoid the second person when writing expository essays. For example: "You might appear to be in love, but there's always something to make you think or act differently. You can see this point illustrated in the Alice Walker stories."

The use of culturally based stylistic features like the ones described above should be encouraged: first, because grammatical errors are more highly stigmatized and should be given prime attention in student writing, and second, because culturally based stylistic features are valid manifestations of the diversity of our country.

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